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ABSTRACT

To shed light on why President Ronald Reagan chose radio as his favorite medium, a study examined President Reagan's radio addresses in the first year of his second term, 1985, and compared them with his first term speeches of August 1982 to August 1983. The study also compared President Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats with Reagan's radio talks and conducted Flesch Readability Tests on three Reagan speeches to see how easy they were to understand. Findings showed that (1) in comparison with the earlier speeches a repeated pattern of domestic economy and foreign policy issues dominated the year's sample in both terms with a slight reversal in 1985 of foreign policy over domestic economy because of the Geneva Summit and other foreign trips; (2) in the second analysis, which involved television evening news coverage, the same topic reversal obtained, with two out of three networks choosing foreign policy topics over the domestic economy; (3) the third comparison of the "New York Times" coverage also showed a reduction in coverage of the President's speeches in 1985 by comparison with 1982 and 1983, with the average length and number of front page stories remaining about the same; and (4) the Flesch's Readability Test confirmed that an epideictic topic like Mother's Day would be easier for the public to understand than topics on the economy or foreign policy which were "fairly difficult" to grasp, but, surprisingly, "The Great Communicator" was not considered easy to understand. (Three tables of data and 15 notes are included.) (MS)

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A Comparison of the First and Second Terms

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President Reagan and Radio:
A Comparison of the First and Second Terms

The two most effective electronic media communicators of modern times have been Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. President Roosevelt's Fireside Chats are legendary. President Reagan's use of the radio is less well known, but he continued to prefer this medium over the press conference.

The purpose of this paper is to examine President Reagan's radio addresses in the first year of his second term, 1985, and to compare them with the first term speeches of August 1982 to August 1983, as reported by Martin.[1] A brief comparison of Roosevelt's fireside chats and Reagan's radio talks will begin the paper. In addition, Flesch Readability Tests will be conducted on three Reagan speeches.

Since Mr. Reagan is the first President since Roosevelt to make extensive use of the radio, a few words of comparison would seem in order to introduce the topic and to suggest hypotheses why Mr. Reagan may have chosen radio as his favorite medium. That Ronald Reagan had been an admirer of FDR is well known, as is his early Democratic party affiliation. Both used the radio extensively in their governorships so the application on the national level was not surprising. Of course,

Mr. Roosevelt did not have the option of television as Mr. Reagan had, and would have used the fire-side chats much more frequently than he did had not his staff advised against speaking too often because they did not "want the Fireside Chat to lose its appeal to the people.[2] The two leaders differed significantly in the number of radio talks each gave. President Roosevelt delivered twenty-eight Fireside Chats over eleven years while President Reagan presented forty-nine talks in 1985 alone. In fact, Mr. Reagan's presentations are billed on the local radio station as "weekly radio talks." With such regularity, the president could be more than an elected official reporting to the folks back home; he could be an agenda setter and newsmaker as well. Both Presidents intended that each talk should concern one major issue which was of immediate interest. Mr. Roosevelt soothed the nation's nerves, for example, in times of a banking crisis with such issue discussion. Mr. Reagan did not always restrict his talks to one issue. A final contrast between the two is the length of their radio presentations. The typical Roosevelt talk took thirty minutes, while Reagan's Saturday speeches usually last five minutes. Reflection on the Roosevelt comparison suggests at least three hypotheses for Mr. Reagan's preference for radio: first, his deep admiration for FDR and his communicating skills; second, the possibility of positively affecting electorate attitudes by the speeches themselves and the coverage they would receive; and, finally, the corollary to this,

that the agenda he set would be the news of the day or upcoming week.

A main focus of this paper is to examine all of those Saturday speeches which President Reagan delivered from January 26 to December 21, 1985.[3] The forty-nine radio addresses covered eleven topics with ten talks having two topics. The two dominant themes addressed were domestic economy (19) and foreign policy (22). These ratios are similar to Martin's findings for the 1982-83 year's talks of 21 and 16 respectively[4]. See Table 1. The Geneva Arms Control meeting, the Geneva Summit, and the Bonn Economic Summit account for the increase of foreign policy topics over domestic economy in 1985. Domestic economy topics centered around the budget, tax reform, and the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings bill, protectionism, and the achievements of the Reagan administration vis-a-vis inflation and jobs. The 19 talks which addressed foreign policy issues were one topic oriented for the first six months and addressed the MX missile, the President's trip to Canada, Central America, Nicaragua, and the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Five speeches addressed holidays or anniversaries (Mothers Day, the Fortieth Anniversaries of VE Day, VJ Day, and the U. N., and Armed Forces Day), four speeches spoke to the farm problem, two concerned intelligence/counterintelligence issues, and one each on education, the American Red Cross, recovery from his operation, civil rights, and legislative achievements. In ten talks the President treated two topics: Central America and the

TABLE 1

Comparison of 1982-83 and 1985 Coverage of President Reagan's Radio Address Topics by TV Networks and the New York Times

Topics	Times Included in Radio Addresses		Reported by ABC		Reported by CBS		Reported by NBC		Reported by NY Times	
	'82-3 *	'85	'82-3	'85	'82-3	'85	'82-3	'85	'82-3	'85
Domestic Economy	21 (40%)	19 (39%)	--	10 (45%)	13 (42%)	3 (35%)	15 (50%)	9 (35%)	19 (40%)	11 (3
Foreign Policy	16 (31%)	22 (45%)	--	9 (41%)	13 (42%)	6 (50%)	11 (37%)	14 (54%)	13 (28%)	20 (5
Crime	3	0			1		1		3	
Prayer-Abortion	2	0			1		1		2	
Environment	1	0							1	
Organ Donation & Gov't Efficiency	1	0					1		1	
Education	3	0			2				3	
Holidays	4	5		1			1		1	3
Red Cross	1	1								
Farm Problem	0	4		2		2		1		4
Intelligence-Counter Intelligence	0	2		1				1		1
Recovery from Operation	0	1		1		1				1
Civil Rights	0	1								1
Legislative Achievements	0	1								
Attempted Assassination Anniver.	0	1								
Series Totals-52		57	0	22	30	12	30	24	47	43

* 1982-3 data from Martin study

anniversary of the assassination attempt; federal budget and Nicaraguan Peace; federal budget and Bonn Economic summit; VE Day anniversary and Mothers Day; military spending and Armed Forces Day; foreign policy and the 40th Anniversary of the United Nations; foreign policy (the upcoming meeting with Egypt's President Mubarak, Jordan's King Hussein, and USSR's Foreign Minister Shevardnadze) and the Mexican earthquake; the federal budget and the Middle East; tax reform and the farm problem; and tax reform and Nicaragua. He did not give equal time to his two topics consistently and was not wed to a given order of presentation. For example, on March 30, before he discussed the main topic of Nicaragua, he referred to the fourth anniversary of the attempt on his life and the key figures involved. He reversed this order with the foreign policy-Mexican earthquake speech, concluding with two paragraphs on the south of the border disaster.

In comparing the media coverage of President Reagan's radio addresses in his first and second terms, results of Martin's analysis of 52 speeches from 1982-83 are compared with 49 speeches given in 1985. (Table 1) As noted above, the striking increase from 16 foreign policy topics (31%) in 1982-3 to 22 or 45% in 1985 underscored the surge of political and economic visits overseas with trips to Canada, Geneva, and Bonn. Summits make news, and so the topics of radio talks on Saturday set the focus for the following week's news coverage. With the exception of education and holidays, all other topics were different for

1982-83 reflecting the pertinent topic of the moment. An operation and the anniversary of an assassination attempt stand out as examples.

A major difference in television network coverage of Mr. Reagan's talks on the Saturday evening news between the first and second terms samples was the dramatic drop in coverage by CBS from 31 in 1983-3 to 12 in 1985. NBC also dropped slightly from 30 to 26. ABC, which was not included in the Martin study, fell in between the other two networks using 22 of the radio speeches in their weekend news. ABC also differed in their ratio of domestic/foreign topic coverage, using more domestic topics (10) than foreign (9), while the other networks covered significantly more foreign subjects compared to domestic (CBS, 6 to 3, and NBC, 14 to 9). Note also that NBC's 14 was over half its total coverage. Arguments could be made for both. Globe trotting and the Nicarguan conflict commanded attention, but this was also the year of tax reform at home which evidently ABC deemed very important coverage. No discernible pattern emerged for the coverage of miscellaneous topics. The networks seemed to avoid self-serving claims such as the June 15 1985 speech which extolled what an exemplary record the Reagan Administration had achieved on civil rights. He declared, "this administration has acted vigorously to defend and extend every American's fundamental right to equal treatment."[5] NBC did report on Mr. Reagan's appeal to the electorate to urge their representatives and senators to support his tax reform package. His persuasive

urgings included the argument that "In a way then, the President should be the people's lobbyist, your lobbyist."[6] The other two networks chose to ignore this broadcast.

Besides topic comparisons, networks differed on production decisions. How long will the story be? Should it be the lead story? With or without Reagan's voice? With or without a response by the opposition party? As seen in Table 2, the average length of the broadcasts increased about a half minute from 1982-3 to 1985, a significant spurt when considering a two minute segment. Out of the total Reagan broadcasts of 52 and 49 in the two series studied, comparatively few talks--3 to 7, became lead stories. CBS had the highest percentage, 42, with its five leads, suggesting that with their comparatively few total speeches covered, they were careful about making newsworthy selections. Despite the claim of Minow, et al., that "Because of who he is, newsmen and their editors allow the President to speak for himself'"[7] Mr. Reagan's voice was heard at the most 57 % --by NBC in 1982-3. The actual number of times the voice was used was reduced both by CBS and NBC between 1982-3 and 1985. Finally, data are ambiguous on how often the networks incorporate a Democratic response in their programs. CBS went down by five between the first and second series of broadcasts, while NBC added one to their total in the second series.

Television evening news coverage of President Reagan's radio speeches, then, decreased from 1982-3 to 1985, dropping dramatically in the case of CBS. Foreign policy topics outscored

TABLE 2

Comparison of Network Coverage of
President Reagan's Radio Talks, 1982-3 and 1985

		ABC-TV	CBS-TV	NBC-TV
Number of broadcasts covered	1985	22 (45%)*	12 (24%)	26 (53%)
	1982-3	-- **	31 (60%)	30 (58%)
Average length of broadcast -	1985	2.35 minutes	2.19	2.63
	1982-3	--	1.58	2.17
Lead Story	1985	3 (14%)***	5 (42%)	7 (27%)
	1982-3	--	6 (19%)	7 (23%)
With Reagan's Voice	1985	9 (41%)	6 (50%)	13 (50%)
	1982-3	--	13 (42%)	17 (57%)
With response by Democrats	1985	10 (45%)	5 (42%)	10 (38%)
	1982-3	--	13 (42%)	9 (30%)

* Percent of total broadcasts given by Reagan: 1985= 49; 1982-3=52.

** ABC-TV broadcasts were not included in the Martin study.

*** Percent of broadcasts by each network.

domestic topics in 1985, reversing the 1982-3 pattern. Networks tended to avoid programs which seemed self-advancing or more public relations than news. In production options, though the length of broadcasts went up from the first and second series, the lead story and programs with Mr. Reagan's voice either went down or were unimpressive as newsmakers. Use of the Democratic reponse yielded no useful conclusion.

Coverage of the President's radio talks by the New York Times significantly decreased from 47 stories or 90% of all the broadcasts in 1982-3 to 36 or 73% in 1985. See Table 1. Story length, however, was almost identical averaging 20.11 column inches in 1985 compared to 20.7 inches in the first term sample. Only four broadcasts earned lead stories in the Times in 1985, down from the seven in 1982-3. The 12 front page stories, or 35% of their total coverage, was about the same as the 1982-3 front page attention of 31.3%. Complete texts of two radio talks were printed, those of November 2 and 9. In the first, delivered from Camp David, his usual broadcast base, he expressed a receptive attitude to the Soviet Union's agreement to a 50% arms cut. The November 9 talk came from the Voice of America studio, was expanded to ten minutes, and was addressed to the Soviet Union. Gone were hints of any "evil empire" label. Indeed, he used a conciliatory tone, citing the need to avert an atomic war. Times reporter Gerald M. Boyd described the President as using his weekly radio address "for a folksy but firm presentation of his views," noting that Mr. Reagan "hoped his meeting with Mikhail S.

Gorbachev would be fruitful and would lead to more sessions between the two leaders[8]." The Times' emphasis on foreign policy topics (20 stories or 59%) agrees with CBS and NBC choices with 50% and 54% respectively. Again ABC is odd man out with its slight edge of domestic economy topic choices.

The New York Times, then, significantly decreased its coverage of Mr. Ragan's radio speeches in 1985 as well as reducing the number of lead stories. However, column inch coverage on stories covered remained about the same as did the percentage of front page stories. Though saliency of the issues at hand was no doubt a major reason for the reduction of the number of talks reported, perhaps the fresh flowering of the first term was beginning to fade a bit.

Earlier the President was described as being "folksy" in his radio talk. This suggests an easy-to-understand speaking style. To assess just how easy Mr. Reagan's radio talks are to understand, a Flesch Readability Formula was run on three speeches in different topic areas, the domestic economy, foreign policy, and a holiday. Mr. Reagan's reputation as a skilled communicator lead to the hypothesis that his radio material would score in the standard to fairly easy categories, with probably the holiday speech (Mother's Day) scoring the highest, meaning it would be the easiest to listen to.[9]

Table 3

Flesch Readability Scores for Three Reagan Speeches

Radio Talk:	Nation's Economy	Arms Control	Trip to Europe & Mother's Day
Flesch Readability Score	59.6 *	56.1 *	65.26 **

* 50-60 Fairly Difficult

** 60-70 Standard

As Table 3 shows, none of the speeches qualified for the "Fairly Easy" category, but the May 11, 1985 "Trip to Europe and Mother's Day talk did score as "Standard," the easiest of the three. "The Nation's Economy" speech, delivered on July 27, 1985, almost qualified for the "Standard" level. Mr. Reagan may well have learned from Mr. Roosevelt how to deal stylistically with fiscal issues. Mr. Roosevelt's labor secretary Frances Perkins once drafted a line for one of his speeches dealing with social security which read, "We are tryin

to construct a more inclusive society." When she heard the speech weeks later on the radio,it came out,"We are going to make a country in which no one is left out."[10] Mr. Reagan matches that simplicity with "We can't rest until everyone who want to work can find a real job."[11] It is quickly evident that this fourteen word sentence has twelve one-syllable words in it. The jargon of arms talks no doubt forced down the readability score on the "Arms Control and Reduction Negotiations" message aired on November 2, 1985. Confronted with "strategic nuclear arms," "intermediate-range nuclear forces," "conventional weapons," and "destabilizing first-strike advantage," one's penchant for simplicity is severely challenged.

This paper began by comparing President Ronald Reagan and Franklin D. Roosevelt's use of radio, and found significantly more frequent use by Mr. Reagan but with shorter speeches. Both tried to restrict their talks to one issue with Mr. Reagan departing from this fifteen percent of the time. It was suggested that Reagan's admiration of Roosevelt reinforced his preference for radio. Another reason for choosing radio was his his belief that minds could be changed using this method. Paul Erickson maintained that "Reagan knew full well the power of language 'in the press and on the airwaves' to affect public opinion."[12] He seized on that medium at a crucial time in his political career, following the Republican defeat in 1976. Ted Koppel observed, "He went back to radio with an issue that would project him ever more permanently on the national scene, the

Panama Canal „13 A third hypothesis was that the radio speeches could be newsworthy or even agenda setting. This argument became less convincing as data on TV coverage were analyzed. Numbers were down in 1985, significantly for CBS. Even the New York Times fell off slightly in coverage. Overall, however, it must be pointed out that an American President is still the biggest story in town. Two scholars claim that "The President represents the single most important story that the network follows on a continuing basis."14 Though the radio speeches had a share of stories covered, the time of delivery--Saturday noon, the brevity--five minutes, do not constitute the best time and method to capture the other media consistently. Two final reasons for using the weekly radio speech command notice. One is the President reverting to form, doing what he became skilled at doing out of college as a radio sportscaster. He became comfortable and extremely skilled at that medium. Also, the preference of a script to the more challenging give and take of the full-fledged press conference made radio attractive.

In the first of three comparisons with Martin's 1982-3 review of 52 speeches, it was found that a repeated pattern of domestic economy and foreign policy issues dominated the year's sample in both terms with a slight reversal in 1985 of foreign policy over domestic economy because of the Geneva Summit and other foreign trips. In the second analysis, which involved television evening news coverage, the same topic reversal

obtained with two out of three networks choosing foreign policy topics over the domestic economy. Overall coverage was down with one network plunging to less than a fourth of the President's speeches being covered. Conclusions on production data were somewhat contradictory with length of the broadcasts rising but lead stories and stories with Reagan's voice decreasing from 1982-3. The third comparison analyzing the New York Times coverage also showed a reduction in coverage of the President's speeches in 1985, with the average length and number of front page stories remaining about the same.

Finally, the application of Flesch's Readability to three Reagan radio addresses confirmed and surprised. It confirmed that the epideictic topic like Mother's Day would be easier to understand than topics on the economy or foreign policy which were "fairly difficult" to grasp. The surprise was that "The Great Communicator" would be difficult to understand.

Walter Mondale, in the wake of a resounding defeat by "The Great Communicator," told William Schneider, "I was no good on the mastery of modern communications...We've got to learn how to communicate. We've got to know how to lift people. It's a mysterious process. We need people who can play in that arena."15 Mr. Reagan has been successful at lifting people with his mellifluous radio voice, clear organization, and appeal to what Schneider calls the "passionate side of politics" which involves such things as values, loyalties and commitments. His

skill at the pragmatic side politics is another game to be played on another field.

NOTES

1. Howard H. Martin, "President Reagan's Return to Radio," Journalism Quarterly, Winter 1984, 817-821.

2. Stephen Early, quoted in Sharon, Franklin D. Roosevelt Collection II (Nov. 1949), 10, reported in Waldo W. Braden and Earnest Brandenburg, "Roosevelt's Fireside Chats," Speech Monographs, Vol. XXII(November, 1955) 310.

3. Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, 1985, Vol. 1 & 2 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985).

4. Martin, "President Reagan's Return to Radio" 820.

5. Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, 1985, Vol. 1, 800.

6. Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, 1985, Vol. 1, 731.

7. N. Minow, J. Martin, and L. Mitchell, Presidential Televsion (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 22. As quoted in Roderick P. Hart, Patrick Jerome, and Karen McComb, "Rhetorical Features of Newscasts About the President," Critical Studies in Mass Communication, (1984): 267.

8. Gerald M. Boyd, New York Times 10 October 1985, A1.

9. Rudolf Flesch, How To Write, Speak, and Think (New York: Harper and Row, 1960). 305-310. Mr. Flesch developed a set of scores to determine the ease of reading. His table follows:

Reading Ease Score	Description of Style	Typical Magazine
90 to 100	Very Easy	Comics
80 to 90	Easy	Pulp fiction
70 to 80	Fairly Easy	Slick fiction
60-70	Standard	Digests, Time, Mass non-fiction
50-60	Fairly difficult	Harper's, Atlantic
30 to 50	Difficult	Academic, Scholarly
0-30	Very Difficult	Scientific, Professional

10. Earnest Brandenburg and Waldo W. Braden, "Franklin Delan

Roosevelt," in A History and Criticism of American Public Address, Vol III, Edited by Marie Hochmuth (New York: Longmans Green and Co., 1955) 505.

11. Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, 1985, Vol. 2 937.

12. Paul D. Erickson, Reagan Speaks (New York: New York University Press, 1985) 23.

13. Ted Koppel, ABC Special, Jennings-Koppel Report: The Reagan Presidency, 23 April 1987.

14. M. B. Grossman, and M. J. Kumar, Portraying the President: The White House and the Media (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) 259. As quoted in Hart, et al. above.

15. William Schneider, "The New Shape of American Politics," The Atlantic, January 1987, 41.